

STRANGE WOMAN IN THE WILDERNESS



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SUMMARY

In the untamed wilderness of the Northeast Cape, Ryk Schoonraad, a determined young farmer, stumbles upon a life-changing discovery on his modest farm, Horison. Hidden beneath the earth lies a treasure of topaz, promising wealth and a future he had only dared to dream of. But this newfound hope quickly turns to ashes, literally.

Upon returning from Kimberley, where he confirmed the value of his find, Ryk is met with devastation. His farm is burned to the ground, his dreams shattered, and his loyal companion, old Andries, is gone. Behind this act of ruthless destruction is the notorious outlaw Mertel Duvenage, a man with a score to settle. Refusing to succumb to despair, Ryk vows to rebuild and protect what remains of his world. As he begins piecing his life back together, a stranger enters his path, Marina Roux, a self-proclaimed naturalist from Cape Town. Marina's arrival is as sudden as it is puzzling. Her evasive behavior and mysterious motives leave Ryk torn between trusting her and suspecting she may be a part of the treachery surrounding him. Is she an ally in his struggle, or yet another threat cloaked in secrecy?

The frontier's harsh beauty masks its dangers, and Ryk finds himself drawn into a storm of betrayal and violence. Old alliances crumble, and enemies multiply as he confronts not only the dangerous Mertel Duvenage but also his neighbor, Cor Bastiaanse, a man he once trusted. As secrets unravel and loyalties are tested, Ryk must summon every ounce of courage and wit to protect his land, his treasure, and those he comes to care for. Set against the backdrop of a rugged frontier rife with greed, ambition, and danger, this gripping tale of survival and resilience follows Ryk Schoonraad's fight to reclaim his destiny. As betrayal looms and the truth about Marina deepens the intrigue, Ryk's journey becomes a thrilling battle for justice, freedom, and the unyielding pursuit of a brighter horizon.

EXTRACT

Ryk looks up at the gleaming barrel, at the sinewy hand that slowly closes around the stock and the trigger. Then he looks down and in his still hand he sees the yellow tinderbox glint. He already feels the flame of pain when the bullet hits him. He already feels how oblivion, eternal oblivion, is closing in on him. For a moment he realizes Roelien's suffering if she has to die there below.

His action is more the reaction of fear than anything else. Yet it is also an act of courage, of the desire to live and not to die at the hands of a villain. It is a fleeting, decisive act and it is as quick as a snake's strike. He throws the tinderbox hard and accurately so that it hits Joos Vermeulen full in the face. At the same time, he uses his last strength and flings his body forward so that Joos Vermeulen's pistol shot flies inches above him, the bullet slams against the rock and then sings venomously away over the abyss.

The impact of the tinderbox threw Joos Vermeulen off balance for a fraction of a second, his eyes twitching with pain, causing him to lose his balance slightly, and before he can recover, Ryk's powerful arms have closed around his waist. Ryk hurls him against the rock and before he can lift the pistol, the tall man leaps forward and steps on Vermeulen's hand holding the pistol, pinning it to the ground.

4. STRANGE WOMAN IN THE WILDERNESS

Chapter 1 PROMISE RICHES

This morning it is all joy in the pub of the small hotel in Driekoppies in the Pioneer world of Northeast Cape where the sun beetles sing their grinding song early in the tops of the camel thorn trees. A warm day. A demanding day. Just the day for beer.

There is a group of men standing in front of the short bar of the small hotel. Chatting, laughing, excited men, with their heads forward, all eager to hear.

There is one who stands head and shoulders above the rest, a man with two shoulders almost as broad as the frame of a wagon, and two narrow hips. He has a dark head and his blue eyes sparkle vividly. He is the center of everything. Not just for himself, but also for what he has to share.

“What did you hear in Kimberley, Ryk?” asks one of the uncles, all eager to hear.

Ryk Schoonraad, the tall man with the big, supple hands, looks them over. All familiar faces. Cheerful, hardy, courageous pioneers. He sees their eyes sparkle with anticipation. He looks from one to the other. From Uncle Snaar Gerrits, the small, thin man with the watery eyes to Cor Bastiaanse, the big, ravenous, cheerful foreman of the Driehoek cattle farm.

Ryk Schoonraad knows all these men. Together with them, he experiences sweet and sour here on the frontier. Together with them he works hard and braves dangers. Like them, he must also watch day and night against attacks by lions, leopards, wild dogs and other wild animals. Like them, he must face all the twists and turns of these parts. Because they are few, they all know each other, help each other when necessary, stand together when a lion becomes too bold or when the wild dogs do too much damage. Yet the frontier man now looks very carefully at all of them. He looks them over one by one and he wonders if he should make the announcement that he so eagerly wants to make. Would he be able to trust them all? Would they all really be his friends? Or is it just possible that there is one among them who could harm him?

A man is a man. Ryk has already learned that and sometimes when you least expect it, a man can stab you in the back.

This news that he has brought with him is not ordinary news. It is something very special, something extraordinary, something that will be of interest to them all. The frontier farmers are good people but they are also rough people. And if there is something to be had, they don't wait around for it. When nature has something to offer, most people become reckless, Ryk has already noticed.

And yet, when he has looked them all over, the tall dark man knows that he will not be able to hide this secret from them. He knows that he wants to make it known to them because he trusts them. He trusts them implicitly.

"Guys," says Ryk Schoonraad, therefore, jokingly but also with a hint of seriousness in his eyes, "I am rich."

At first it looks as if they are dumbfounded. Not one of them moves and not one says a word. They just stare attentively and in apparent petrification at Ryk Schoonraad as if the meaning of his words is too much for them all.

"Ryk, you are rich," squeaks Uncle Snaar Gerrits and the crowd bursts out laughing.

Suddenly Ryk Schoonraad's attractive brown face becomes serious. "I went to Kimberley," he says. "And after what they told me there, it seems to me as if I have something." He pulls a small leather pouch out of his trouser pocket, opens it and shakes the contents out onto the bar. A few pebbles clatter on the wood of the bar. Beautiful, semi-transparent light blue stones.

"They say, fellows," says Ryk Schoonraad, "that I have topaz."

"I told you so," interrupts Cor Bastiaanse. "Before you went to Kimberley, I told you that you had something in that little mine of yours. You didn't want to believe me."

Cor hits Ryk between the shoulders so that he chokes on the beer he is drinking.

"That's right," says Ryk. "You knew more about it than I did, Cor. But I just wanted to make sure what it was. They say it is a good stone. It's worth quite a bit of money. Not nearly as much as diamonds, but still a good stone."

“Are you going to mine it?” asks Uncle Snaar Gerrits, pushing with his little body through the men so that he can get closer to Ryk.

“Yes, uncle, I’m going to mine it. If I can make a little money from this stone, why not? My plot is not big. I would like to buy another piece. Perhaps these stones will help me to realize that ideal.”

“You are going to become a rich man, Ryk,” says Cor Bastiaanse. “I know what I’m talking about. That topaz is worth money.”

“Do you know it, Cor?” asks Ryk. “Do you know these stones?” “Old son,” says Cor affably, “I’m older than twelve. I’ve seen a lot of stones in my life.”

Ryk looks attentively at Cor. Cor is still a relative newcomer here in the area of Driekoppies. He is actually a Transvaler. But in his eyes you can see that life has already taught him a lot. That he is a man with experience. He manages the Driehoek cattle farm as perfectly as one can expect. The owner of Driehoek lives in distant Cape Town, and as far as Ryk knows, he has never been to Driehoek.

Ryk finds it somewhat strange that the owner of Driehoek has never made an appearance in these parts. Driehoek is a large and good farm, but as far as Ryk knows, none of them has ever had the honor of seeing the owner of the place or even hearing much about him. He has talked about it with Cor Bastiaanse before. He has asked him a little himself, but Cor seems very mysterious about who exactly the owner of Driehoek is.

Ryk has reason to be interested in the owner of Driehoek. There is a piece of field that borders his own land that he would very much like to own. He has looked at it many times and it is a valuable piece of land. It seems as if the piece is meant to be part of his land and he has already thought about buying this land to expand his own farming. But every time he talks to Cor about his boss, Cor is vague and evasive, a phenomenon that seems very strange to Ryk.

Ryk has come to know Cor well, because they are neighbors. Although the homesteads are far apart, they are still neighbors because Ryk’s plot borders the northern point of Driehoek.

“You should have told me too, Cor,” says Ryk, “that these stones are worth a lot, then it might have saved me a trip to Kimberley.”

“No way,” answers Cor and beckons the barman closer, “I didn’t want

to poke my nose into your business, old neighbor. I thought you should find out for yourself what's what with these blue stones. Now you know. They can mean a fortune to you."

Uncle Snaar Gerrits sticks his thin, trembling little finger out at Ryk. "Now look here," he says, "I will come and mine the stones for you."

Ryk laughs at the old man with his little eyes and his friendly face. Uncle Snaar has been broken by fate in this frontier world. A few times he has lost everything, so he moved to Driekoppies, where he lives alone in a corrugated iron shack and does odd jobs here and there.

"I am a born miner," says Uncle Snaar. "In Kemmerkie I dug for diamonds. I'll lay out your whole mine for you, nephew Ryk."

"Okay, Uncle Snaar," says Ryk. "Then we'll do that, uncle. You can come and start whenever you want. But you must not expect money at the beginning, because I don't have it. I will give you food and clothes, that's all I can afford now."

"No, but that's fine, nephew Ryk," says Uncle Snaar. "What do I want to do with money?" says the old man, changing his quid of tobacco for a moment. "Food and clothes and fresh air are enough for me. I will drive it for you, Ryk. I will mine these blue stones so that the dust stands like it is now."

Cor Bastiaanse orders a round of drinks for everyone. When their glasses are filled, he takes his glass in his big fist, raises it up. "We drink to Ryk Schoonraad," he says. "And to the blue stones."

They repeat the words in a chorus and christen Ryk Schoonraad's upcoming mining activities there and then.

They gather around Ryk here and their eyes are full of enthusiasm and zeal. They talk excitedly and they clink glasses with Ryk. They do it not only because he has brought them important news, but also because they like Ryk. This tall dark man with his blue eyes and his powerful shoulders is already an institution in these parts. Here on the entire frontier there is probably no one who does not know about Ryk Schoonraad. And in the hearts of these men Ryk has taken a warm spot. They know him as brave, helpful, fearless and righteous.

When a lion is being hunted or when a bunch of wild dogs have to be trapped, then Ryk is always at the forefront. When a bunch of hostile Bushmen have to be put in their place, then Ryk Schoonraad always

carries the banner of the frontier farmers. And when one of them gets hurt or sick, then he is the man who organizes everything, who races miles to get medicine or to fetch someone who has to come and nurse the sick person. He is always cheerful and good-humored, which is why they are now so enthusiastic to gather around him, pat him on the shoulders, shake his hand and congratulate him happily.

And Ryk, he is grateful for it, because he likes these people. He loves them. He and they live together. All the hardships but also all the joys of the frontier they experience together. He feels a little melancholy when they all raise their glasses together to congratulate him.

“Guys, I have to ride,” says Cor when they are done. “I have a whole lot of calves that I have to go brand.”

He greets them all, walks out, gets on his brown blaze and rides away. The others also chat for a while. Then they also start to slowly go their separate ways. The magical moment is over. The news they have been waiting for so long is out. Ryk Schoonraad has discovered valuable stones on his farm. For Driekoppies it can be worth a lot, and they are all excited about the prospect.

“Well, guys,” says Ryk, “now you know. I want to ride. I have been away from home for almost three weeks. I want to go and see what it looks like there.” He walks out slowly with an almost floating movement like a cheetah that is stalking something. But in that suppleness there is also a great strength, a purposefulness that one seldom encounters.

Under the small corrugated iron veranda, Uncle Snaar catches up with him. “Is it now agreed, nephew Ryk, that I will come and mine for you?”

“It is agreed, Uncle Snaar,” says Ryk. “Just come whenever you can. I have enough picks and shovels. Get yourself a pony somewhere and come out as soon as you can. I’m glad you want to come, because I don’t have time to mine stones. I have to look after my farming.”

“Then we will do that, nephew,” says Uncle Snaar.

And when Ryk looks down at him, he sees something in the small eyes that warns him. An expression so unclear and yet so unmistakable. He turns to his big stallion that is tied to the halter pole in front of the small hotel. He has barely taken two steps when Uncle Snaar Gerrits’ voice